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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON TUNISIAN DEFENSE
MINISTER MORJANE

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (SBU) During the Ambassador's 29 September introductory call with Tunisian Defense Minister Kamel Morjane, the Minister assured the Ambassador that the close cooperation between the U.S. and Tunisian militaries, and broader cooperation between the two governments, would make the Ambassador's job easy. The Minister also spoke of Tunisia's support for the Maghreb Union and discussed his views on opportunities for multilateral engagement, which he saw as mainly limited to participation in peacekeeping operations. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Gray paid a September 29 introductory call on Defense Minister Kamel Morjane. Also in attendance were on the Tunisian side, Colonel Major Mohamed Ghorbel, the Defense Ministry's Director of Cooperation and International Relations, and Captain Major Mohamed Khammassi, advisor to the Minister of Defense for International Relations, as well as the Deputy Chief of the Embassy's Office of Security Cooperation (notetaker).

Bilateral Military Relations

¶3. (SBU) Minister Morjane assured the Ambassador that the Tunisian military enjoyed excellent relations and cooperation with the U.S. military and that this was true of the two governments as well. He pledged to continue the long history of cooperation and "make the Ambassador's life easy," emphasizing that any difficulties between the two countries were just "disagreements of the moment." He said the attitude in Tunisia toward the U.S., both in the government and from the people, had improved substantially since the election of President Obama. Morjane thanked the Ambassador for the recent delivery of 50 ground surveillance radars (GSRs), which would help address the mutual U.S.-Tunisian goals of providing border security, halting terrorism, and thwarting extremism in general.

¶4. (C) Briefly addressing the terrorist threat in Tunisia, Morjane pointed out the transnational nature of the threats meant that threats could originate anywhere, saying it could "from Djerba or even Bangladesh! Not just Libya and Algeria." The Minister said the Tunisian military was particularly concerned about maintaining a presence in the desert and had to be constantly mobilized along the 1,400kms (870 miles) of borders with Algeria and Libya.

¶5. (C) While the Ambassador agreed that Tunisia and the U.S. have a long history of cooperation, he told Morjane that in

the current economic environment in the U.S., Congress would give increased scrutiny to all budget requests. The Minister or his subordinates should take every opportunity to explain their needs to us, as it would help us explain the requirements to Congress. As an example, the Ambassador praised the recent approval for the SDO/DATT to travel to Tunisia's southern desert, saying that the information gathered during this trip would help the OSC better understand Tunisia's requirements. Morjane in turn, used this example to point out the unique relationship between the two countries, saying that the south is a sensitive area and approval of the U.S. SDO/DATT is an exception to normal Tunisian policy (one granted to no other attache. He highlighted this approval as indicative of the trust they placed not just in the US, but in the SDO/DATT personally.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador then asked Morjane to encourage his subordinates to take advantage of the many other opportunities offered by the U.S. Referring to the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations' (CNO) desire to expand relations with Tunisia, the Ambassador regretted that both the U.S. and Tunisia had lost out by Tunisia's decision to not send its CNO to the International Seapower Symposium in Washington. Morjane quickly replied that this decision was not an indication of lack of interest, but a question of decision-making protocol within the MoD. For service commanders, their travel schedule and a schedule of whom they will invite for the entire year is determined before the year begins. For example, he said that for next year, the decision had already been made that the Air Force Commander would attend the U.S. Joint Military Commission (JMC) in May, while the Army and Navy service chiefs would attend JMCs in France and Italy. Stating that the President does not like

to see his service chiefs travel too much, he said that the CNO invitation simply arrived too late. (Comment: The invitation arrived early enough for over 100 other CNOs to agree to attend. End comment.) The Ambassador assured him of a sustained U.S. commitment to engage and said that we would continue to send invitations to events and training opportunities in the hopes that the Tunisians would participate in the future.

¶7. (C) Apparently having hit a nerve, the Defense Minister defended Tunisia's cooperation with the U.S., saying that Tunisia participates in 12 JMCs each year, putting a real strain on its ability to support every event. However, Morjane did concede there were other issues with cooperating with the U.S., saying that Tunisia must balance "contradictory positions." He explained to the Ambassador that while Tunisia wants to please its friends (the U.S.), it didn't want other "friends or brothers," to misinterpret things. He seemed particularly concerned with President Qadhafi, stating that the unpredictability of the Libyan leader made normal relations difficult. Morjane recalled that while President Ben Ali has had some success in influencing Qadhafi in his 22 years in power, things were completely different under President Bourguiba, when relations were "a continuous war."

The Arab Maghreb Union

¶8. (C) The Defense Minister also discussed the Arab Maghreb Union, bluntly acknowledging that it is not really unified, but stressing "it is not our fault," and crediting President Ben Ali with making every effort to make the Union succeed. He rued that a successful union would be better for the Maghreb's economies, particularly by increasing bargaining power with the European Union, as well as improving the region's security. He had even hoped the Arab Maghreb Union would provide the framework of discussion and political discourse that could bring a solution to the Western Sahara question. Instead, the current situation between Algeria and Morocco makes unification unlikely. At one point he seemed almost nostalgic for the French colonial period as he reflected on how residents used to be able to take a train

from Tunis to Casablanca without passports. The Ambassador said that Undersecretary Burns had hoped to meet with Arab Maghreb Union foreign ministers on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly meeting last week, but this had not been possible due to the departure plans to attend the African-American summit in Venezuela.

Multilateral Relations

¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador then asked Minister Morjane how he saw Tunisia engaging in multilateral relations. Morjane said that while they agree with multilateral approaches in principle, in reality, it was a question of means for the small military. He also pointed out that Tunisians thought differently than Arabs in the Middle East and President Ben Ali would not engage in diplomacy for diplomacy's sake, but only when tangible results could be achieved. As an example, he said that President Ben Ali had cancelled the 2004 Arab League meeting in Tunis after becoming convinced that the meeting would accomplish nothing.

¶ 10. (C) Morjane then turned the conversation on multilateralism to peacekeeping. Even here, though, he made clear Tunisia's concerns with international involvement, particularly in any operation in which Tunisia might be seen as biased. It was this fear of appearing biased that led to Tunisia's decision to not support peacekeeping operations in Darfur or Lebanon. While Tunisia did get involved in MINURSO, it later regretted it, as it found itself caught between Moroccan and Algerian interests. He did point out Tunisia's support for operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo and along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border.

¶ 11. (SBU) Briefly turning to relations with Israel, the Minister pointed out that in 1965 under President Bourguiba, Tunisia became the first Arab country to advocate for a two-state solution and relations with Israel. This fact gives Tunisia the right to look Israel in the eye when it comes to building relations. However, this issue, as with the Western Sahara issue, is broader than just two countries and requires a global solution.

¶ 12. (SBU) As the meeting came to a close, the Ambassador raised the issue of Secretary Gates' Senior Defense Official

(SDO) initiative. While the Ambassador acknowledged that the initiative, which places both the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) and the Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) under one officer, was primarily an internal U.S. matter, he pointed out that it would make things easier for the Minister, by giving him one point of contact who could address any U.S. military issues. The Ambassador also pointed out that it was a testimony to the strong U.S.-Tunisian relations that Tunisia was selected to be one of the first countries for implementation of this initiative. After the Ambassador explained to Morjane that the DAO and OSC were still two separate offices and that the SDO was still under Chief of Mission authority, the OSC Deputy Chief explained that the biggest change for the Tunisians was that the SDO would now be addressing issues for both offices, instead of just the DAO. Morjane then said that he would have no problem working with the SDO in any capacity. However, he did request that the Ambassador send a diplomatic note to the Foreign Ministry to explain the change in status.

Comment

¶ 13. (C) Defense Minister Morjane was generally pleasant, and jovial at times, during the meeting and said all the right things about military-to-military cooperation. However, we have heard this line from him before and it is unlikely that we will see any immediate effort toward expanding relations with the U.S. End comment.

GRAY